BUSINESSMAN PROFILE

Aaron Fechter

BY PAT BEALL

Forget everything you may have heard. Aaron Fechter, boy inventor, is not perfect. Forget the dark good looks. Forget the creative talent. We are here to tell you Aaron Fechter is not perfect. It says so right here, in the latest issue of Fortune magazine. That's the magazine that, all in the same breath, hails Fechter as a creative genius and manages to call him an egomaniac as well. In other words, not perfect.

But Aaron isn't taking this laying down. He's not, he explains intensely, sitting on the edge of his chair because of what they said about him personally. It's because of what they dared to say about his brainchild, Creative Engineering, that rankles the most.

"I take issue with the point of her whole article...the possibility that Show Biz Pizza animation would not be a long lasting concept. We're doing it for the art, and we intend to develop it into an art form that's as viable an entertainment medium as movies, TV, and radio. You know, animated characters!" And here the intense inventor leans even further on the edge of his seat. "Computerized, servo driven, animation! Where we have performers who are actually robots, and all kinds. Right now, they're bears and stuff. Later they may be serious Shakesperean actors."

Better not to scoff. Remember, the man talking was once a four year old who took radios apart for entertainment. By 10, he graduated from taking radios apart to putting television sets together. It's the same man, who, at age 19, invented a three wheeled, fuel efficient automobile. The car ran, but money was tight, financing scarcer still, and the three wheeled wonder stayed on the drawing board. Undaunted, Fechter went on to develop the leaf eater—a gizmo that literally swallows leaves up out of swimming pools. Alas, no one was buying, at least not in quantity, so the inventor was reduced to selling his contraptions door to door. It was behind one of those doors that Aaron met a man who wanted to know if he did electronics work.

"I was pretty hungry," Fechter recalls, "so I said yes." The man behind the door was in the market for amusement park electronics equipment, so Fechter hurridly began reading up on electronics—specifically, control systems for shooting gallerys. The systems worked out well, but Aaron suffered a disillusioning blow of sorts when it became clear the man who had hired him was not going to pay him for his inventions—not a single dime. Fechter promptly decided to go into competition with the man and his company. Creative Engineering was born.

Aaron now smiles at the memory. "I guess you could say I got into the animation business...sort of out of revenge."

The first character out of Creative Engineering's garage was something called a Willie Wabbit. With long ears, big feet, and a sizeable snout, Willie ate animated carrots across from the Easter baggage counter in Orlando International for about two years before forced retirement.

"Just that one character took six months to build and sell, and then," Aaron laughs, "another year of work just to keep it running." By the time Willie was put to rest, a bigger, better offer had entered Aaron's life in the person of businessman Bob Brock.

Brock had a unique idea for a restaurant. It would serve pizza. It would have video games, to make a little money. And, most critically, Show Biz Pizza would provide animated characters for entertainment. Would Fechter's fledgling company be interested in taking charge of the entertainment? It was, Fechter remembers, a "perfect dream opportunity. Not only did it seem like a dream then, it's worked out to be one."

The dream takes shape at Show Biz Pizza seven days a week, when Fatz Gorrilla, Mitzi the cheerleading mouse, Looney Bird and the rest of the Show Biz gang wind up their tubes and diodes and let loose with some of the most sophisticated animated antics this side of Disney.

Fechter muses. "We've got a show that's comparable in sophistication to the best stuff that Disney has done, but is inexpensive enough to put it in every pizza place. I couldn't even get a job as a junior apprentice in Disney. Disney has turned into a corporation that requires degrees and engineers just like any large corporation, so I really couldn't get a job there much less sell them my early antiquated tinkerings. Besides, I always wanted to beat Disney. I always wanted to have animation better than Disney's. I wanted to have people come to me and tell me my animation was better."

Fechter may aim high, but then, he has made a habit of success. Creative Engineering has grown from a three man operation to over 200 employees who turn out dozens of Looney Bird and friends in a 136,000 square foot factory. Even with that kind of growth, the president of the company takes pride in what he sees as a family atmosphere. Employees in blue jeans still sit on floor and tables shooting concepts into the air—and Fechter still listens. Take Billy Bob, the single toothed bear with a heart of gold and the innocense of Bambi. It turns out the inspiration came from none other than Fechter's room mate.

"He's the nicest guy in the whole world. He got his name, Billy Bob, because he's from Tennessee and he's really country folk. Wonderful room mate. Helps me take care of the house, doesn't get mad if I leave dishes everywhere. Almost too nice. So we decided we wanted to name one of our characters Billy Bob. The character has evolved into a sweet, overly sweet,

ideal. Sort of a cross between a teddy bear and Mr. Rogers. A perfect moral example for the kids."

But Fechter, acutely aware of the tender loving care that goes into a single automated figure, is hoping that someone besides the kids is watching...hoping that somebody notices what he says are vast differences between his shows and the rival Pizza Time Theater shows.

"The whole operation," insists Fechter, "is just a difference in quality. Their attitude about their show is simply, put the stuff up there, let it move around, flash a little light, play one or two minute songs that nobody cares anything for, and let it go at that. I really hope they're wrong, because we're putting a terrific amount of energy into our shows, into each little thing. I wish you could see how particular we are in our recording sessions, in our programming sessions. You see, we're really careful about bringing things to life, and providing entertainment that adults can love as well as children."

But for the grown up who cannot establish a rapport with Billy Bob and Looney Bird, there are other plans. Think about this: A nightclub full of animated creatures, a Show Biz Pizza for the over 21 set, no really risque material, cautions Fechter, but something along the lines of a satirical look at nightspots. All he's looking for now is a place in Orlando to make it happen.

In fact, making things happen is what Fechter—and Creative Engineering—are all about. At this point, just a few years into the company, the sky is the limit.

"This," he declares, "is like Disney in it's very earliest days. It's still very small, and the people here still have that love for what they're doing that just can't be matched by any amount of money. These people want to win whatever there is to win—and the biggest thing there is to win is the hearts of the people who see their shows. And they're working for it."

Not that every day rains roses at the Jefferson Street workshop. There are days, Aaron admits, when he dreams of something simpler—like chucking it all and joining a rock and roll band. But for now, the diodes are humming, Fatz the gorilla is learning a new tune, someone in back is putting finishing touches to Uncle Klunk, the talk show host, a talking tree is whispering something in a willing ear, and all is right in Aaron Fechter's gadget crazed, glittery, animated world. •

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